

NEOLITHIC ARTIFACTS FROM NORTHERN ANGOLA: REVISING THE DATA ON AN ANCIENT COLLECTION AT IICT¹

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Abstract: This is a brief study about a small assemblage of lithic artifacts collected in M'banza Congo (Northern Angola) in the 50's and currently kept at Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical (Lisboa). Our aim is to associate this find to the more recent archaeological data available for the region and evaluate the importance of the assemblage in terms of the archaeohistory of Angola. These polished stoneaxes allow us to set out a relation to the 'Ngovo Group', a group of archaeological sites with a distinctive industry of pottery and stone tools identified in Lower Congo-Zaire.

Keywords: polished stone tools, Neolithic, M'banza Congo, Ngovo Group.

Resumo: Este é um breve estudo sobre uma pequena colecção de artefactos líticos recolhida em M'banza Congo (Norte de Angola) nos anos 50 e actualmente parte do acervo do Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical (Lisboa). Pretendemos enquadrar o achado na informação arqueológica mais recente sobre a região e avaliar a importância do conjunto ao nível da arqueohistória de Angola. Estes artefactos permitem equacionar uma relação com "Grupo Ngovo", um grupo de sítios arqueológicos identificados no Baixo Congo-Zaire pela associação típica de cerâmica e machados de pedra polida.

Palavras-chave: machados de pedra polida, Neolítico, M'banza Congo, Grupo Ngovo.

THE POLISHED STONE TOOLS FROM NORTHERN ANGOLA

This small assemblage of four polished stone tools was offered in 1950 to the Anthropobiological Mission of Angola by Mr. Manuel Martins, who at the time was administrator of S. Salvador do Congo, now M'banza Congo (Camarate França, 1964).

Even though the exact location of the site and the stratigraphic context of the find were unknown, there was already some awareness of the importance of the assemblage. The anthropologist and professor António de Almeida (1900-1984), head-chief of the Anthropobiological Mission of Angola, and the French clergyman and prehistorian Henri Breuil (1877-1961) recognized the morphological relation between these polished stone axes and other Neolithic assemblages already known in Africa (Camarate França, 1964: 53). Beyond this assemblage, there are only two more references about Neolithic

artifacts in Angola: two stone tools found in the valley of the Cuanza River and another assemblage of five stone tools found in the region of Galangue (Ervedosa, 1980: 166). Even though these are considered Neolithic by some authors (Ervedosa, 1980) we have no description matching the morphological attributes of the stone tools from M'banza Congo.

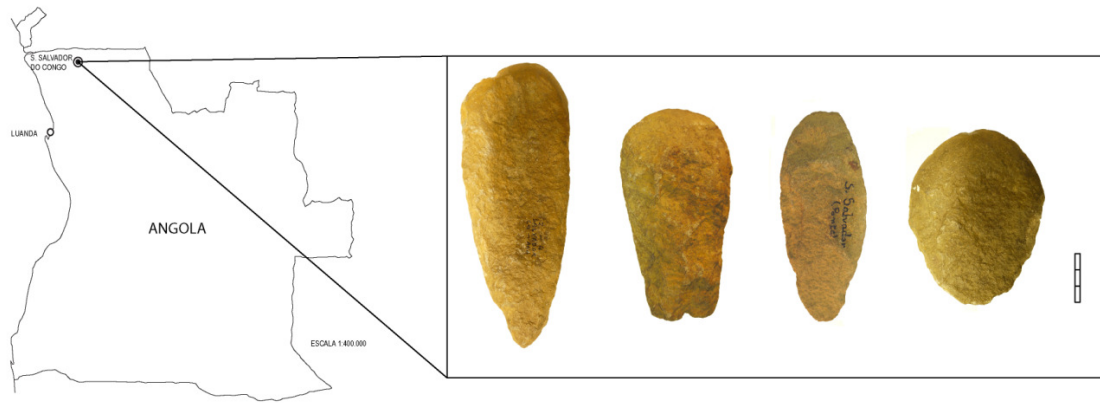


Figure 1. Location of the find

These small stone axes are coarsely made, since the polishing is almost limited to the cutting edge. They were first knapped to create a narrower shape and then polished with more effort at the edge. The raw material used is amphibolite and all of the tools show macroscopic traces of use since the cutting edges show compatible uncontrolled chipping. These characteristics strongly resemble the groundstone tools identified in the archaeological remains studied in the Lower Congo and currently known as a pre-metallurgical culture in West Africa, the Ngovo Group.

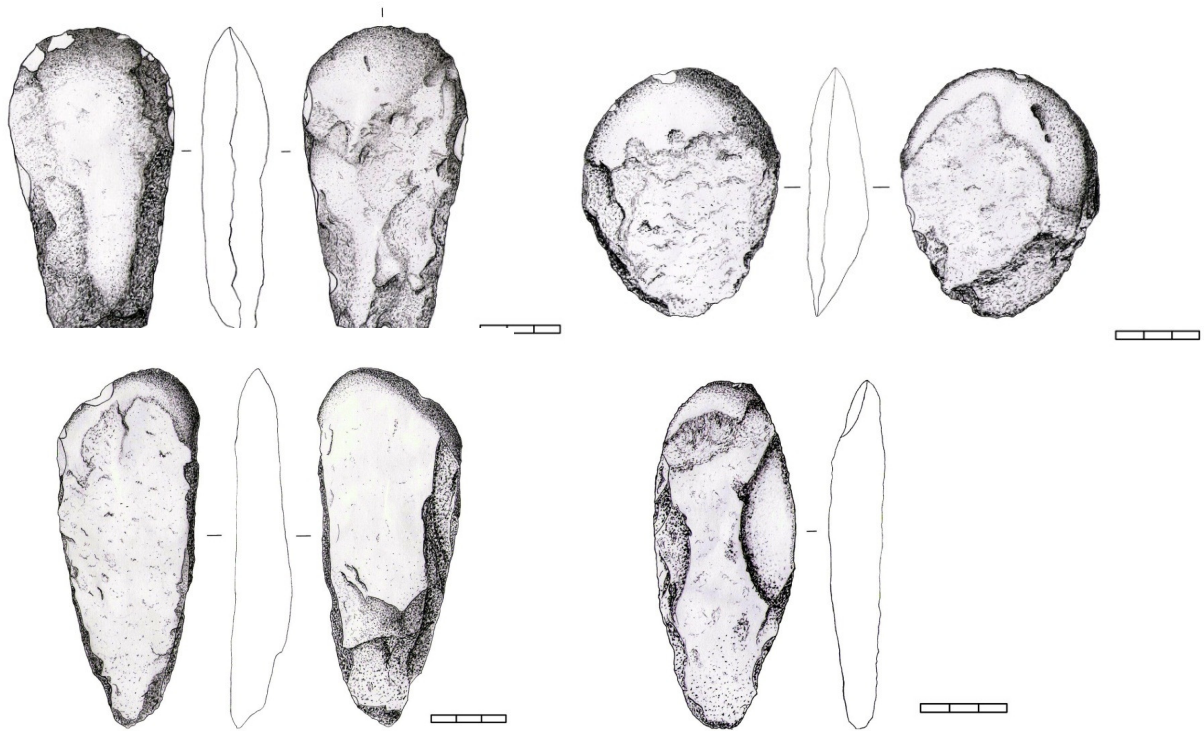


Figure 2. The polished stone tools from M'banza Congo (drawings by D. Matos)

THE NEOLITHIC IN WEST AFRICA: THE NGOVO GROUP

'Ngovo group' was a name introduced by the anthropologist and professor Pierre de Maret (1986) after a long research in the Lower Congo-Zaire that demonstrated a clear association between polished stone tools and a type of pottery formerly known as "Group VI pottery", preceding by several hundred years the beginning of ironworking in this region.

The Ngovo Group, defined by these artefactual markers, is dated between 350 100 BC and is the furthest to the south cultural tradition identified in the western expansion route of the african Neolithic to the southern fringes of the equatorial forest.

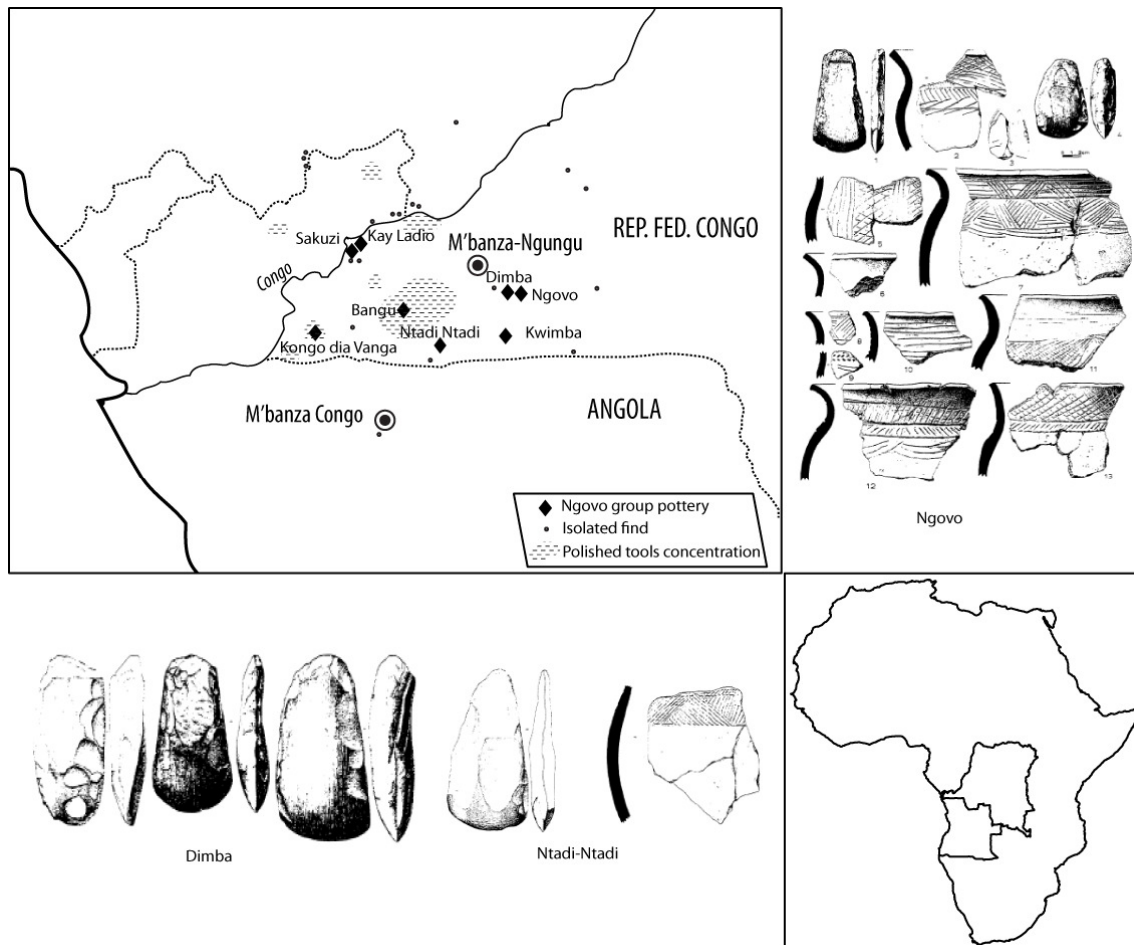


Figure 3. The Ngovo Group (de Maret, 1986)

The expansion of a food-producing economy in Africa is explained by a “wave of advance” model that seems to be corroborated by the archaeological remains and the radiocarbon dates now available (Eggert, 1993) showing an almost sequenced development of neolithic cultural traditions that encompass the Congo-Zaire river basin. The contribution of linguistic studies, in particular Bantu languages, has allowed setting out these population movements in the Neolithic as the first expansion of proto-Bantu people. This expansion movement is generated by pristine processes traced by the prevailing cultural markers that ultimately allow a mapping of identities in a particular territory. In this framework, and having considered the models developed by Ruhlen (1994), Huffman (1989) and Phillipson (1977), the Ngovo Group represents the end of the formative time span that created the “Proto Banto 3 Core” in the West and became the starting point of the second western-Banto expansion to the East (Denbow, 1990), crossing Angola and Zambia, to intersect the eastern branch that rose from the cultural groups around Lake Victoria (Huffman, 1989). Thereby the groups that occupied

northern Angola played an important role in the global spread of the Neolithic in Sub-Saharan Africa from West to East.

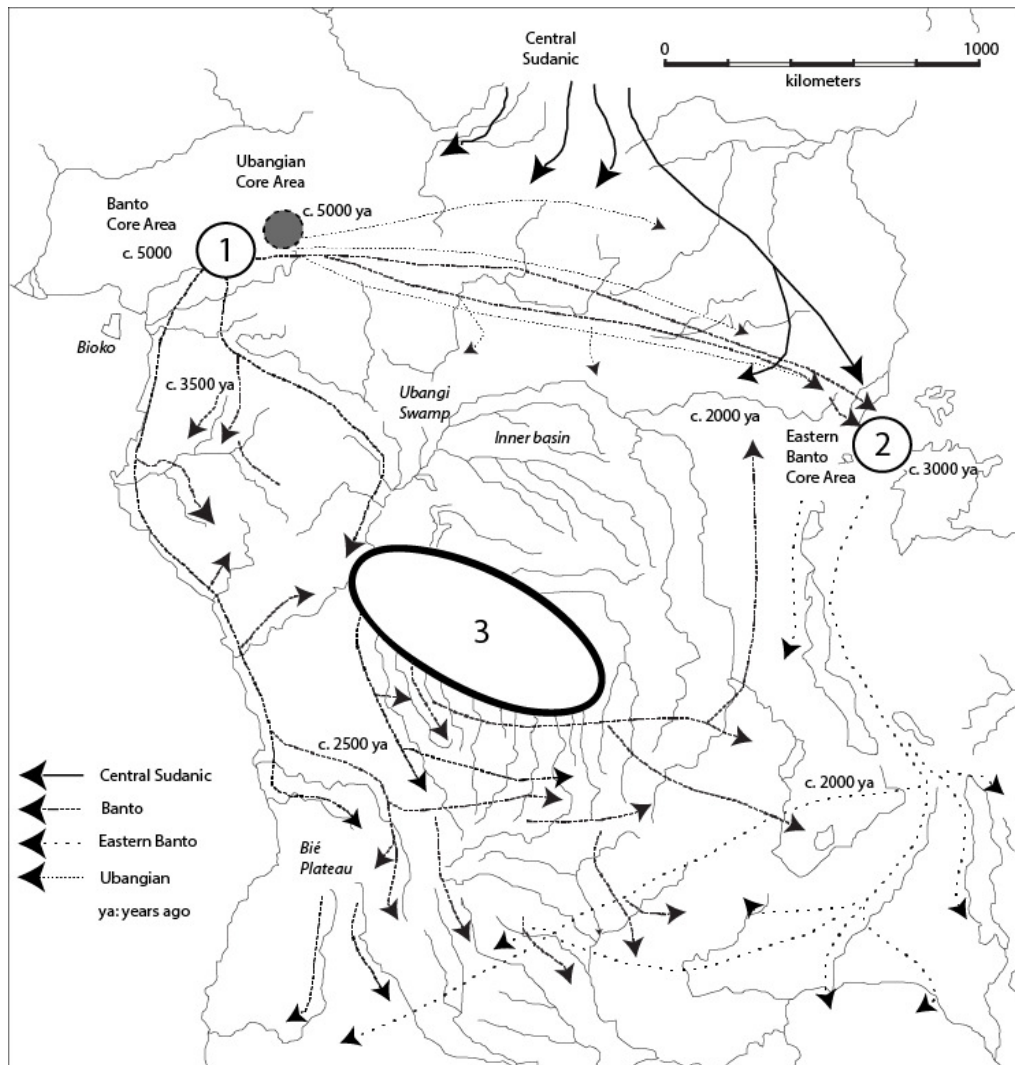


Figure 4. The initial stages of the Banto diffusion (Denbow, 1990): 1 – Proto-Banto core 1; 2 – Proto-Banto core 2 (Eastern Banto); 3 – Proto-Banto core 3 (Western Banto)

CONCLUSIONS

We acknowledge the fact that it is still quite problematic to designate the M'banza Congo polished stone tools as Neolithic, especially considering the long debate about the concept of Neolithic in West Africa (summarized in Sinclair *et al*, 1993). The use of this term for West African contexts has become politically incorrect mostly due to the weight of the European terminology. However, for a matter of clarity, the conventional name still suits best the technological innovation that precedes the beginning of

metallurgy in the Congo basin, if we consider the concept as acceptable in an ecological setting that does not favor the preservation of botanical or faunal evidence that suggest the domestication of plants and animals.

We remain confident that the new researches being developed in M'banza Congo by Sónia da Silva Domingos (also present in this conference) will bring a better insight about the origin of the supposed Neolithic polished stone tools and moreover about the process of expansion of food-production and metallurgy from the rainforest to the southern savanna in West Africa.

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